fly the nest

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by v10l3t_jpg

Summary

hammerhead sharks die if they stay still.

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"I'd try my best."

"You always do." She wraps her arms around him again, burying her face in his chest, memorising the tide of his breathing, in and out on the moon's puppet strings. "I feel like I'll get out there and my borrowed time will catch up with me."

"Don't say that," Will says immediately, voice pleading – please don't make me think about losing you for good. "Don't say that." Don't make me think about you miles away where I can't catch you when you fall, where I can't hold your throat together.

"Sorry." she murmurs, but he can hear her keep thinking about it; her little car smashed on the I-40 W, the Pacific's current sweeping her under at the beach. The universe tying off loose ends, not out of cruelty but because she's an anachronism, like Donnie Darko – she's wondered aloud before what her jet engine will be, crashing through the roof and caving her chest in. And blindly, Will has always wanted to protect her, no matter how much blood on her hands, in her mouth.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

"Violet, Kat, Alex, and I are thinking of going to California for spring break." Abigail says on a Saturday morning in Hannibal's kitchen, the taste of freedom on her tongue as she takes another forkful of sausage and scrambled eggs.

"A wonderful idea, Abigail." Hannibal smiles supportively from the sink where he's already scrubbing the grease from the still-hot pan.

"We're gonna road-trip it." she says, startlingly blue eyes bright with 20-something excitement, and Will can't fault her for wanting to be a big girl in a big city, another nameless face in the crowd.

He remembers being young and feeling like you were all grown up, the way his nerves buzzed the first time he put on his police uniform and his too-big boots from the army surplus store – just a kid from New Orleans hoping he made his daddy proud, even if his hair was a little too long.

*

She's packed (light) and ready. She has all the essentials – phone charger, gas money, pocket knife, sunscreen – listed off by Hannibal as she affectionately rolls her eyes and reassures him she's almost twenty-three.

She has apple green converse on, too hot for her usual boots, backpack on her shoulders. She's brought her *women want me, fish fear me* baseball cap she wears on fishing trips with Will, and as he watches her hug Hannibal, it crushes him like an insect how much she's grown up in the past few years, how much he loves her.

Will wants to believe it's his own protective paternal drive and not still empathising with Garrett Jacob Hobbs after all this time, seeing her through his clouded dead eyes.

"Be safe, but most importantly," Hannibal pulls back to smile at her, eyes glimmering winkingly. "Have fun. Youth is fleeting – you must savour it while the opportunity lingers."

There's something off in Will's eyes, just a hint of sadness in his stormy irises as she turns to squeeze him too. He knows she won't come back.

*

She does come back, of course, bubbling with laughter and stories and, somehow, new recipes; brimming with life. She hasn't tanned exactly, but there's a glow to her, a little less translucence and about a hundred more freckles. It makes her feel more real, more than just a living dead girl, a half-ghost.

But she'll go back. Will knows it's coming for months, long before she ever mentions it again.

"I think I want to go to California for my Master's." Abigail exhales, like an anxious breath she's been holding for too long.

Hannibal pauses the journey of his mug to his lips, immediately supportive. Half of his stories and explanations of extravagant dishes begin with him as a young man in Florence – Hannibal lives day by day, open to exploration and experimentation and experience. Of course he wants her to go.

Will feels like he's been slapped.

It's not that he doesn't want this for her – and even if he didn't, she's an adult and he's not her father by blood nor is his name on the adoption papers. Neither Baltimore nor Wolf Trap nor anywhere in between can offer her the fresh start and the freedom she needs, so he has no real reason to oppose it. God knows Will would have lost his mind if he'd stayed in the sticky heat of verdant New Orleans or Biloxi with its screeching seagulls, stagnating like algae, making no progress, no movement, no difference.

So he doesn't oppose it.

He can't pretend to share Hannibal's delight that Abigail is spreading her wings, but he doesn't do what her father did and begin a murderous rampage to keep her close, control under the guise of love. Will helps her count her college credits and fill in application forms and he celebrates with her when she's accepted to San Diego (even though it feels like being shot in the chest) because that's his daughter.

As moving day creeps closer, they all start to feel it – the anticipation of her absence. They grow clingy.

He and Hannibal are very much in love and unafraid to show it – Abigail regularly and aptly likens them to Gomez and Morticia Addams – and Abigail has always been close to them, but now it's intensifying, the air thick and heavy before lightning crackles across the purple-grey sky.

There's always a little desperate sadness in her eyes as she asks if they want to play Scrabble or go for a walk or watch a movie for the third night that week, as if she's trying to gather as much time with them into her slender hands as she can.

Hannibal begins sketching her more often, packs her lunch for work so she can focus on their conversation without dividing her attention between him and her chicken mayo sandwich. Once, Slipping Through My Fingers by ABBA comes on the radio and in an instant, silent tears are streaming down Hannibal's sharp cheeks. Will doesn't blame him – Hannibal was forty six when they met, unmarried, no children. Now the one he was given is slipping away.

Margot and Alana take her out to their favourite vegan ice cream place and she comes back with three new books and midnight blue paisley print top, freckled face tear-stained. She takes Violet out for a picnic of raspberries and honey and plant-based cream in the park while the August heat lingers. *She's* lingering. It feels like she's saying goodbye forever.

On their last fishing trip (which neither of them wants to say aloud), all Abigail can think about is their first fishing trip together, Will's curls unruly under his cap, the sun on his skin, how she'd never seen him happier or more relaxed. Now she's never seen him more anxious, rainstorm coiled under his skin as he cuts the engine and just sits for a second with his eyes closed.

Waist-deep in the stream, water cool as it rushes against her waders, she watches his Adam's apple bob as he casts another line with an intensity.

"Naming them all Abigail?" she teases, but she knows he is.

He looks over, shoots her a guilty half-smile. "Are yours Marissa or Louise today?"

"I'm alternating between Will and Hannibal," she says and the short laugh he makes sounds like a cry. "Seeing who catches me the most."

He just quirks his brow and turns his eyes back to the stream. There's silver glinting at his temples now, like the fish in the stream. She wonders how she's never noticed before.

Eventually, she can't take the words trying to claw their way out of her throat and spits them out into the water with the floating trout.

"I don't have to go if you don't want me to."

"I do want you to go, I'll just miss you. One father figure trying to keep you grounded is enough."

"Hannibal's really keen on it." she says, testing the waters.

"Hannibal is not a representative example of human behaviour." Will grins fondly under the shadow of his cap.

He wishes she'd go upstate, New York, Maine – somewhere that isn't a 40-hour drive or a plane away, somewhere where he isn't powerless to help her if she needs it.

He knows that she's more than capable of handling herself and the sun will do her good, allow her to bloom the way washed out Minnesota couldn't. She can't reach her full potential anywhere that the sunlight is more white than gold, and as they share a look across the water, he knows that she knows it too.

*

"The air good over there?" Will grins drily after Abigail sighs into Hannibal's shoulder for the third time in twenty minutes.

She clicks her tongue, probably rolling her eyes in spite of the smile plumping her freckled cheeks, though Will can't quite see from his spot on Hannibal's other broad shoulder.

"Shut up." she whispers playfully, lowering her voice in the hopes that Hannibal won't hear. If he does, he doesn't react, not that he polices manners so militantly when it's just the three of them – no merit to asking a wolf to eat without spilling blood down its chin.

"You alright, kiddo?"

"I'm just thinking about how much I'll miss this."

"You'll be settled in in no time at all. A change of scenery and a taste of independence will benefit you. I think you'll grow to enjoy not being tethered to anywhere." Hannibal says with a kiss to her forehead that makes her further resent being twenty three and afraid to leave home.

"This isn't like Minnesota and my dad." she says decisively, brow rumpled against Hannibal's cashmere sweater. "I'm not tethered here against my will. I'm docked – a boat safe in the harbour."

This seems to strike a cord with Will, a man raised by bayous and lakes, who carries a rolling merciless ocean in his chest. He reaches across Hannibal and strokes her hair, punctuating the

first stroke with two fidgety bounces of his thumb off the side of her skull.

This is safety; this is home. There is no storm bigger than the two of them, nothing that can harm her, because there she is – nestled into the cyclone's eye like a dormouse in a bluebell, safe in the belly of the beast.

*

On the eve of her leaving for San Diego, Will is still awake with the lamp on when a tearful Abigail ghosts through the doorway.

"Hey," she flashes a watery smile, shoulders apologetic and fearing rejection as they rise. Has she always looked so thin, small and fragile? Has she always looked like she's already gone? "Can I sleep in your bed?"

"Yeah." he nods, surprised that it catches in his throat.

He pulls back the covers, lets her climb in, lets her rest her head on his bicep. Her tears are already soaking into his shirt as he moves his hand to her hair.

"You alright?"

"I remember what happened the last time I tried to fly the nest." She confesses, half dry wit and half dry-mouthed. Will huffs the most pathetic attempt at a laugh against her forehead.

"I'm not going to start killing lookalikes, you don't have to worry about that."

She huffs a laugh back, scoots closer, goes quiet.

"Maybe I shouldn't go." she mumbles, half-hearted even to her own ears. Will empathises entirely without the aid of mirror neurons – he's never been fond of change either.

"Cold feet?" he murmurs, chin on her forehead and he hopes she can't hear the selfish hopefulness in his voice.

"Not genuine, just… now it's the night before, and it's *change* . It's scary."

"You've dealt with more than your fair share of drastic change, not all of it positive."

She scoffs. *Too right.*

"It's just… the thought of Hannibal rattling around that big empty house, and you here. I know you have the dogs but I don't want you to be lonely, if I make any difference to that."

"You do make a difference." Will says immediately. His stubble is scraping her freckled forehead but she doesn't care – she'll miss it soon enough, miss the smell of his aftershave, and this house with its creaky wood floors and duck egg kitchen wallpaper, and the dogs watching over them like guardian angels at the foot of the bed.

"I'm going to be perfectly honest with you," he removes his left hand from her hair, leaning a little further onto his back as he rubs hers with the hand she's slowly cutting off the circulation to. "When I was sick, during the worst of it, I'd have delusions. They were almost… daydreams but I was so immersed in them, it was like drowning. You were in a coma or in Porthaven, and I'd be having conversations with you. We were fishing together." He sighs, guilt settling heavily in his chest, making his ribs creak. "And... I took a minute to warm up to you, to commit, because I was worried the real deal wouldn't measure up."

"Do I measure up?" Her voice quiets to a trickle, afraid of his answer.

"You exceed expectations." Will says, truthful as a choir boy, and she huffs another laugh into the mammoth darkness, humbly unconvinced.

The Abigail that he knows is far superior to the empty paper doll of his inflamed imagination, his first impression of a defenceless, delicate doe a poor substitution for the spunky, observant, brilliant young woman he now knows her to be.

"You are... brilliant, Abigail. I've never enjoyed anyone's company more."

Her forehead rises against his chin. "Except Hannibal's?"

"Including Hannibal's."

She laughs, less like a nervous faded ghost, more committed to the sound, more unapologetically alive. Then she grows sombre again, observes from under his chin, "This feels like a loss."

"I'm not losing you." he corrects, mostly to reassure himself. "You're just gonna be a few states over – you can always come back, or call, or visit. And do call me, if you need anything at all."

Abigail snorts against his chest. "I can't call you from the eastern border of Virginia out to southern California for car trouble."

"I'd try my best."

"You always do." She wraps her arms around him again, burying her face in his chest, memorising the tide of his breathing, in and out on the moon's puppet strings. "I feel like I'll get out there and my borrowed time will catch up with me."

"Don't say that," Will says immediately, voice pleading – *please don't make me think about losing you for good.* "Don't say that." *Don't make me think about you miles away where I can't catch you when you fall, where I can't hold your throat together.*

"Sorry." she murmurs, but he can hear her keep thinking about it; her little car smashed on the I-40 W, the Pacific's current sweeping her under at the beach. The universe tying off loose ends, not out of cruelty but because she's an anachronism, like Donnie Darko – she's wondered aloud before what her jet engine will be, crashing through the roof and caving her chest in. And blindly, Will has always wanted to protect her, no matter how much blood on her hands, in her mouth.

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"I can manage, Abigail. Plenty of life left in this old man." Hannibal argues by the trunk as Will finishes arranging rolled up towels on the backseat.

"You won't be there to lift it out of the car and haul it up to the apartment." she glares back, pretending it doesn't sting in her chest. "Let me."

She sets her hiking boots onto the rough black floor of the trunk, nestled in beside her suitcase and a cooler of water bottles. Will thinks of her tearing up when she finds the money he's hidden in her case, money she insisted on not taking, and his chest feels tight.

She hugs Hannibal tight, noting his ribs solid and reliable and real in the crooks of her sharp elbows. His broad palm smoothes down her hair as he presses a cataloguing kiss to her temple. Something about this completely innocuous action invites the sting of reality into her mind, the corners of her eyes, her lungs where she draws in a breath too sharp, one full of the cultured heat of his cologne.

"No tears." Hannibal murmurs, voice reverberating through her skull and into her teeth, though his dark eyes are hypocritically wet. "Makes driving dangerous."

She kisses his cheek before she pulls away, just to feel the hot skin shift into a smile. They hold each other for a second, him by her shoulders and her by his elbows. The corners of his eyes are creased lovingly and Will has to look away as sharp tears bite at his sinuses.

He looks back as Abigail turns to him, chin dimpled as she curls her lip in a vain attempt to hold the tears back. He catches her in his arms and rocks her back and forth, up on her tiptoes to put her chin on his shoulder.

Will draws a shuddering breath, eyes squeezed shut as he holds her, trying to focus on the shape of her warmth in his arms so he can carry it with him better than any photograph. It won't be enough. It'll never be enough, but Will has promised himself that he's not Hobbs too many times to let that particular malfeasance bloom like spreading mould, so he tightens the leash around its throat like a baying dog.

"Anything you need, just call." he says thickly as she releases him with a watery nod, and then she slips right through the cracks between his fingers. He does not sew them closed.

They both wave as she starts to drive off, car full of suitcases and ambition and a *future* . She makes it less than twenty feet from the end of the driveway when the car abruptly stops.

Hannibal pauses, broad hand hovering in mid-air. Will draws himself up, ready for something to be wrong.

Abigail jumps out of the car, leaving the door flung open, hazard lights on, and sprints back, tears streaming as she gathers the two of them into her arms.

"Sorry," she whimpers. "Didn't catalogue this right."

Hannibal adjusts his posture with a shaky sigh that tells Will he is just barely holding himself together, taking one step behind Abigail so she's sandwiched between them.

They stay like that for a small eternity in the driveway; Abigail's tears soaking into Will's shoulder as she scrabbles for handfuls of his plaid shirt, Will sobbing quietly into her hair as Hannibal squeezes his arm, his cheek against the back of her skull.

None of them need to break the near silence with words, punctuated by birdsong and Abigail's whimpers and Hannibal's soft breaths as he rubs her back. Anyone who drives by would think it's the end of the world.

They are the picture of codependence, Will thinks bitingly and then retracts the statement because they love each other. Their love is survival.

*

"Your thoughts are loud, Will. The roar of thunder before the lightning strikes." Hannibal murmurs in his ear, which is his way of saying *What's on your mind?,* though Hannibal would never lower himself to uttering a sentence so mundane.

"I miss her." Will admits and the next thing he knows, he's crying, big flooding saltwater tears and chest-aching sobs.

"She was right, you know." he manages, Hannibal's protective arm wrapping tighter around his waist. "She was worried about you rattling around that big house all alone."

Hannibal doesn't make any move to defend his ability to occupy his time or argue how accustomed he is to the pleasure of one's own company. He doesn't need to. Will can see through it now.

"My life is more or less the way it was before her, before you. I come home from work to my dogs and my whiskey, and I go fishing on the weekend. Once upon a time, I thought I wanted that back."

Will sounds so heartbroken that Hannibal's own begins to spiderweb with cracks in his chest. "And now?"

Will lets out a sob, desperate and breaking as the edges of the words catch and whine on his canines. "I don't want to be alone anymore."

"You're not alone, Will. I will always stand right beside you." He tries to keep his voice level but it's tearfully unsteady as he pulls the sheets closer around Will.

Hannibal doesn't intervene or interfere, no hand of God appearing to hush and neaten up and fuss. He just allows Will to cry – futile to attempt to delay the inevitable – breathing unsteady as his abdominal muscles tighten and shiver under Hannibal's tanned forearm. Hannibal is not carved from marble, more human than most, and he misses Abigail as much as his partner does, tears of his own slipping across the bridge of his straight nose to dampen Will's curls, salt-flecked with time.

"I want to move in together." Will grits out eventually, determined. "I'll sell the house or rent it out, and I'll put a shed in your backyard and I'll drive down to the stream on the weekends. I want to be with you."

Hannibal wants to make some teasing remark about what happened to them *both being solitary animals* and *needing space or they'd kill each other* , but being right is less appealing than the thought of waking up beside Will every morning.

"We're not tethered to Baltimore, Will. We could find somewhere that would suit both of us."

"We tried that once before, remember?" Will offers an audible watery grin. "I liked that one near Gaithersburg but you wanted a pantry."

"A pantry is practical, Will." Hannibal fusses to distract from the real issue.

"Hannibal. I will *build* you a pantry, I don't care – as long as we're together. We've danced around this for so long now, it's been years – I'm sick of driving an hour to kiss you, asking Alana to feed the dogs – she's gonna block my number."

"How does California sound?" Hannibal teases (Will thinks/hopes – Hannibal is crazy enough to do it, while Will is focused on removing overbearing parents from Abigail's life.)

"I don't think Abigail would appreciate that. She's moving away from her old men."

"Have you considered Louisiana?"

Will still can't tell if he's serious, so he responds as if accepting a hideous sweater from a well meaning relative. "You wouldn't like it that much. I didn't."

"Too humid?"

"Something like that." Will strokes over his knuckles. "What about Lithuania?"

Hannibal stiffens minutely. "That would be a solo trip, Will. It's as Abigail says – some places are stained. It's no longer my home."

"I want your home to be here with me." Will says quietly, a man whose desires are burning a hole in him. He tries only to be selfish when it comes to Hannibal.

"Always has been." Hannibal says earnestly and kisses under his ear.

*

"Hi." Abigail opens, anxious smile in her voice as though she's waiting for his strong opinion on something she's already done.

"Hey. It's good to hear from you." It doesn't have the accusatory bite that it would if Hannibal said it but she smiles sheepishly for no one anyway.

"Sorry, it took me a little while to settle in. I bought cooking utensils and a houseplant with the fifty dollars you *agreed* not to give me – I also found the hundred that Hannibal hid in my boots."

They share a laugh – of course he did, bastard. They both feel the need to protect and provide for her even when she's out of their reach.

Abigail grows sombre like sudden snow rolling in. "How are you holding up?"

Will falls silent for a moment, static over the line as he debates what he wants to admit to. "I keep standing at your bedroom door and crying." He lets out a short sharp breath of a laugh. "I feel like I'm going through menopause."

"Feels like I'm haunting you. You can probably see me everywhere." Abigail observes. She isn't sure whether she wants him to or not.

Will pauses then sighs out a static, "Yeah." and that's the end of that. "How's the golden state?"

"Still feels like a hotel instead of home. You'd think I'd be used to that."

Will huffs a laugh, reaching over to pet the snuffling nose of Max, who has excitedly recognised the voice, even if Abigail's scent is missing. The dogs have been heart-wrenching, watching them searching the house for her, searching for her scent on Will's jeans when he returns as though he's just keeping her out of sight like a box of treats.

Before Will can draw the breath to ask another question, Abigail blurts out, "Will, I've been thinking... far too much, and I just want to thank you. For everything. For all our fishing trips, and the time you fixed my car on the side of the road, and when you bought me pads and ice cream and watched Ginger Snaps with me, and for letting me choose the paint colour in my room." She's audibly in tears, voice trembling across the phone line.

"Abigail, darlin'-" He doesn't realise he's moved his arms to hug her until he's holding the empty space where she used to be, and now he's crying too, aching. The reconstruction doesn't cut it – no warmth in the weavings off the mind.

After that, she makes a point to call regularly. At first Will thinks she'll prefer text – less time consuming when you're juggling work and school and nightmares and rent and cooking for yourself.

Abigail does text every now and then, but mostly, she calls, even for things that could be a text – for things that could be a Google search. It doesn't take long to figure out it's an excuse to chat deeper than pixelated characters. She calls Will for a dripping tap or a weird noise her car is making, and Hannibal for how much flour goes in this recipe and can you substitute this ingredient for that, and then spends at least the next thirty minutes just shooting the shit, enjoying their company.

None of them mind. It keeps them all sane, keeps all their ropes tightly joined with Will's deft fisherman's knots so no one goes adrift.

*

She does come home eventually.

The first time, during spring break – ironic, Will thinks considering that's how he lost her in the first place. He then scolds himself for thinking that way because she is *not* lost and he is *not* Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

She still seems so young, so wide-eyed. The California sun, for all its intensity and near-constant presence, has barely made an impact on her ghostly pale skin beneath cinnamon-speckle freckles. Will worries that she'll dissipate every time a shadow crosses her.

But she comes home, and Will supposes he should be grateful for that.

She smiles fondly, keeping the sadness contained to her eyes when Hannibal tells her how they're driving the real estate agent to the edge of insanity with two comically different sets of steadfast, uncompromising criteria.

She plays with the dogs as though she'll never leave and as though she'll never see them again, hurling sticks as far as she can across the flat fields and laughing loud and free and golden into the evening air when Jack nearly knocks her off her feet.

She coos over Margot's labradorite engagement ring – "Matches her eyes." Alana grins, and Margot looks at her with those same eyes soft with fondness, gazing at her like she hung the stars – and kisses Violet as though the city is falling down around them, clutching handfuls of black fabric like a life raft.

The second time she comes back is for the wedding.

"Hey!" Will beams, gathering her into his arms. She breathes him in, the heat of his aftershave clinging to the soft well worn fabric of his plaid shirt. He smells like home.

They've both put on a little weight, weight they can more than afford to carry. Her cheeks aren't quite so gaunt, more of a presence and less of a ghost than when she left. His midsection is noticeably softer against hers and she finds herself comforted that he's been well cared for in her absence.

He pulls back, appraising her with pride. Did he always have that much grey in his temples, creeping into his beard?

"You look good." He smiles close-mouthed, but the corners of his lips pull down as his chin rises to meet them – bittersweet. "You look happy."

He nods in approval, corners of his eyes creased lovingly and she almost starts crying as hard as when she left for California.

"So do you." she manages and he pulls her back in for another hug.

"I missed you, kiddo." he murmurs with a kiss to her temple that sounds like *stay* .

She squeezes him tighter, memorising the warmth, the shape of him in her arms. "I missed you too."

"Abigail!" Hannibal's bright voice rings through the hall, as close to excitement as one so composed gets.

"Hannibal!" she smiles back as Will releases her.

Though she doesn't have much speed or momentum, she moves towards Hannibal with her arms outstretched and he catches her, twirling her round. She's pleased that he's as strong as ever, that they haven't withered without her, Rip Van Winkle asleep in the mountains as time passes and loved ones age below.

"You are *glowing* ," he beams as her feet meet the floor, broad hands on her shoulders. "California is doing you good."

"It's the sea air." She mirrors his proud smile as he tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I'd say so." His snaggleteeth show as he speaks and it makes something ache in her chest, something stretching its needy hands out and distorting her cardiac muscle.

She hugs him again and whispers "I missed you, Dad." just to feel him smile into her hair, swaying her back and forth gently.

"Congratulations, by the way." Abigail smiles when he releases her, angling her body so she addresses Will as well.

"Thank you." Will grins, taking a step closer with his hands on his hips. This is possibly the happiest she's seen him and it makes her heart swell. "Though the next wedding had better be yours. Violet's a keeper."

Abigail looks back and forth between them, puzzled. "You guys have been hanging out with her?"

"She comes over for dinner about once a week." Hannibal says nonchalant, as if two cannibals regularly having dinner with her vegan girlfriend is the most normal thing in the world. "She's wonderful company, and her dietary preferences have encouraged me to further push the boundaries of my recipes."

"Hannibal is on an avocado kick." Will adds, trying to look long-suffering but only succeeds in looking adoringly exasperated. "Tell her about the avocado ice cream."

"If I remember correctly, you enjoyed it. I believe the word you used was refreshing." Hannibal counters, offence equally as mocking as Will's domestic disdain.

She will leave again, of course. There is no other version of this story. But for now, she is home.

*

"You never mentioned it." Abigail says and there's a confused hurt in her voice – *why didn't you tell me? Don't you trust me?*

"I was just worried that you'd be mad… think I was trying to replace you or something."

"Of course I'm not mad." Abigail's brow dips as she reaches to brush Violet's hair away from her liner-ringed eyes. "Vi, they taught you how to drive, I'm not surprised that you're friendly

with them."

"Just…" Violet sighs and wraps her arms tighter around herself, looking skyward, possibly waiting on divine intervention. "I have never in my life had a loving father figure."

"I know this and I love you." Abigail says softly, the beginnings of a smile curving across her lips. "Thank you for taking care of my folks."

Violet offers a sheepish smile, as though she's not quite sure this is praise she's allowed to accept, and leans over for a kiss to the cheek.

"It was nice just to spend time with them. To relax. Don't get me wrong, I love my mom but I'm her therapist. With your parents, I don't have to *be* anybody. I'm an adult and an equal and there's no… power imbalance, we're just talking and taking turns to cook and washing up together afterwards."

Abigail's hand, star-studded with freckles, finds its way to Violet's knee and squeezes of its own accord – the muscle memory of love and affection.

Violet shoots her a quick, emotionally constipated look that suggests she knows exactly what Abigail's doing. Then she sighs again as though being cared for is an odd and foreign experience, an uncomfortable fabric chafing against her skin.

"I wasn't made to feel like a guest, you know? Like when you go to your great-aunt's house as a kid and you're scared to touch anything, on your best behaviour like it's a job interview." She offers a huff of a laugh and then grows sombre, brow furrowing. "They literally refer to me as their daughter-in-law and they're… proud of me. Like how a dad is supposed to be. And now I feel kinda guilty because they're yours and I wasn't trying to take your place." Her voice grows strained and high-pitched, tugging Abigail's gaze from their intertwined hands and the concrete steps beneath them to Violet, who is rapidly growing tearful like the sudden torrential rain on a muggy August day.

Abigail shakes her head, wide-eyed and desperate to reassure her. "Hey. They're *ours* and you're *not* replacing me."

Violet doesn't seem convinced, because the tears continue. Abigail is in no position to hunt down whoever made her girlfriend feel so guilty about having normal human relationships right now, so she settles for letting Violet rest her head in the crook of Abigail's neck, the side unmarred by fatherhood (or a perversion of it.)

After a moment of silence, save for Violet's shuddering breaths, she whispers, "Will offered to take me fishing once."

Something shifts in Abigail's chest but she's surprised to find that it isn't jealousy. She supposes if nothing has ever been fully yours without the hovering threat of it being ripped from your hands, you don't get a chance to develop a possessive side.

"I felt bad for it but I said no. It felt too sacred. It's yours and his, not mine to intrude on."

"You can go fishing with him, I don't mind." Abigail says into her hair but what she means is *you have always been part of my family.*

*

The wedding will no doubt go off without a hitch, but the potential for something insane to happen is crackling in the room like electricity, Abigail thinks.

Nearly the whole fucking FBI is invited – Jack Crawford, looking dapper as always in a crisp black suit, is in the lobby peering down his nose through his reading glasses at what appears to be a speech because every now and then he amends something or scribbles a note with a biro. Brian Zeller and Jimmy Price, who took the crime scene photos for all of her fathers' (and she means *all* of her fathers) victims, have been hired as the goddamn wedding photographers.

Winston is the ringbearer, much to Hannibal's feigned chagrin, but he *did the best in the trial runs,* or so Will tells her – she would have paid money to see that go down. Besides, all three of them know that Hannibal will eventually concede to anything Will's heart desires, no

matter how ridiculous – except, it seems a barn wedding (she wasn't sure if Will had been joking but the grim look on Hannibal's face suggested the answer was a resounding *no* either way.)

Despite Hannibal's intimate but un-worshipping belief in God, Will gets cagey around organised religion after too long, so they have abandoned a chapel in favour of a very nice stately home.

Abigail is Will's head bridesmaid (groomswoman?). Technically, Beverly – stunning in her smart burgundy pantsuit – is his best man, but she's already fidgeted with everything that needs fidgeted with and is currently lounging, sipping on what is *definitely* only her first glass of champagne.

Speaking of fidgeting, the anxiety buzzing under Will's skin where he stands at the window undoing and redoing his cufflinks is ringing like feedback in Abigail's ears.

"Hey." she says softly. The hand she places on his shoulder seems to send a startling jolt of electricity through both of them.

His eyes are bright, not clouded with worry. It's just jitters and they both know it's going to be fine, brilliant even, but his jaw tenses anyway.

"You look stunning." Will says softly with a look of bittersweet fondness in his eyes as though this is her wedding and he's giving her away into the ether forever. She resists the urge to roll her eyes. She resists the urge to ask to come home.

Abigail pulls the skirt of her heather purple dress out wide and bobs in a fraction of a curtsey, grinning.

Given Hannibal's borderline obsession with aesthetics, the colour scheme had probably been the biggest point of contention in the wedding plan – Will had been rooting for the cool water of a duck egg blue with glinting silver while Hannibal was inclined towards a rich crimson with a simple but stunning gold accent. After many, many drafts and reworkings, by the sounds of it from the exasperation in Will's voice, they'd settled on a beautiful palette of

burgundy, misty blue, and heather purple. *So… the bisexual flag?* Abigail had teased and Will had gone quiet for a moment before he had to laugh, bright as sunlight.

"How are you feeling?"

"Nervous – not as nervous as I thought I'd be."

"Liquid courage?" Abigail teases, bumping him over a little bit with her hip so she can survey the sprawling gardens in full bloom.

"Don't need it. I want to remember this with complete, undisturbed lucid clarity." He shifts closer to her ear, lowers his voice to a breath of fog. "No, it's more that the entire FBI is here that I'm worried about. More police presence than a crime scene."

"You invited them?" she murmurs back in a *take your socks off, your feet get cold* way, and feels the air shift as he shrugs.

"Very quiet wedding without friends from work. A set and a half of dead parents, a dead sister, and some neurologists don't make for the liveliest guest list – no pun intended."

Abigail can't argue with that. Before the BAU, Abigail can maybe dredge up a handful of colleagues from the riverbanks of Will's police days, few with names and even fewer with faces. Some may even be the same guy mentioned in two different carefully extracted stories. Will has always been a far cry from the social butterfly that Hannibal is, with his curated museum of connections to opera and art galleries, though a rare few of them more than skin deep, there for show, another stitch in the person suit.

Hannibal is undoubtedly delighted, though. It's all part of the game, outsmarting them from right under their noses. Keeping a poker face, exchanging pleasantries and flashing his snaggleteeth at detectives who no idea what those canines are capable of. Abigail's sure he'd be in charge of the kitchen if he could, slipping long pork loin onto guests' ornate dishes. He'll have to settle for the private glee of it all, the adrenaline thrill of knowing what they don't – that they're watching two monsters swear their eternal love, cloven hooves hidden under polished brogues, charred claws of ribs keeping in exposed quivering hearts, concealed

under ruby red pocket squares and heliotropes and gleaming bands, one silver, one gold, embedded with glimmering celestial bodies of tanzanite, ruby, and diamond.

"How are *you* feeling?" Will asks, tugging her back down until her heels click on the floor beside him.

"I'm good." she says, because she is. "Excited… Emotional. Weirdly proud." she says, because she is. Surprising how much it catches in her throat though, how heavy it feels in her chest.

"Hey." Will murmurs. His gaze is softened, sharp hunting glint gone from when he was searching the grounds like a dog searching for a rabbit. She feels her chin dimple and before she can pull it back under her control, she's against his chest, swaying like driftwood on the tide. His hand cradles the base of her skull like a newborn, like a fawn, bow legged and uncertain, his stubble-tickly cheek hot against her temple. "It's okay, it's all okay, darlin'."

She doesn't cry properly, tempting as it is, because the wedding starts in twenty minutes and she doesn't have time to take off and reapply all her makeup because of smudged mascara. She just squeezes him, lets him murmur a reassuring current of thanks and praise and love beside her new conch piercing, then she puts on the most convincing, stable smile she can manage and busies herself with the final details.

She's still feeling a little unstable when the doors into the hall split open, but without a wobble, she walks him down the aisle, past the stunning lavender smile of Bella Crawford and Violet's proud, wet-cheeked grin towards a glowing, pristine Hannibal, beaming at the rows of detectives and agents who couldn't conceive of what the man next to her is capable of.

*

After the emotion of the ceremony, the fuss of the reception, the buzz of dinner, all Abigail wants is to flop onto the bed in the hotel room and close her eyes. Of course, the universe could never allow this level of peace and her phone pings a notification almost the second her eyelids kiss closed. It's a Facebook message from Beverly, an iPhone camera photo of her in Will's embrace, gentle as a dog's jaws, backlit by the towering window, clear as the stream.

Even when she sees the professional quality ones from Zeller and Price's proper expensive cameras – shot with angles and lenses and lighting retouches, ones that make Hannibal's beaming crow's feet look so dignified, ones that make Will's temples glint beautifully with threads of silver, doe eyed amid a riot of flowers – the one from Beverly is her favourite. It's the first that she prints, the one that stings her sinuses when it catches her eye over the sink full of bubbles back in her San Diego apartment, sitting proud and alive in its frame.

It's the one that means she knows she's part of their pack, no matter where she is.

End Notes

thank you so much for reading!! this is technically the finale of a bunch of other fics from this series but I've sort of moved on from this fandom and it seemed a shame to leave something I'm proud of languishing in my google docs.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!